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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT SIRLEAF DELIVERS ANNUAL ADDRESS TO LEGISLATURE

REF: (A.) 09 MONROVIA 802; (B.) 10 MONROVIA 95; (C.) 10 MONROVIA 97

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. President Sirleaf delivered her fifth annual message to the National Legislature on January 25. In it she highlighted legislation needed to continue national recovery, and discussed her administration's accomplishments, challenges and plans according to the pillars of the national Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). Significantly, she cautioned Liberians about the challenges ahead, vowed to intensify her fight against corruption, recognized the country's lingering economic problems, and promised continued infrastructure expansion, especially in terms of access to roads, water and electricity. Sirleaf, in a deviation from her scripted speech, offered a way forward on dealing with recommendations detailed in the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) final report and concluded her address by announcing her intent to run for re-election in 2011 (Ref B). END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf delivered a condensed 34-page version of her fifth annual message to a joint assembly of Liberia's National Legislature on January 25. (A longer 85-page version, she told legislators, would be uploaded to her office's website.) The first part of the speech closely mirrored the goals outlined in the GOL's Poverty Reduction Strategy and Sirleaf emphasized her administration's successes and shortcomings according to the PRS' four pillars: (1) peace and security, (2) economic revitalization, (3) good governance and the rule of law, and (4) infrastructure and basic social services. The president also touched on Liberia's relations with international partners.

¶3. (U) In a deviation from the version of her speech prepared for delivery, Sirleaf offered her recommendations on how the GOL should respond to the final TRC reports recommendations. Then, in an unexpected move, the president, concluded the address by announcing her intent to run for re-election (Ref B).

MESSAGE STARTS BY MIRRORING POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY GOALS

¶4. (U) LEGISLATIVE AGENDA: Sirleaf first highlighted the previous year's legislative achievements (Ref A), then followed with a list of legislation still under consideration that she views as key to continuing Liberia's "national renewal." Achievements include: the Public Financial Management Act, amendments to the National Commission on Human Rights Act of 2005, and acts establishing the National Airport Authority, Land Commission, and National Transit Authority. The president then noted legislation to be put forward in 2010, including: the National Security and Intelligence Reform Act, an act amending the public procurement and concessions process, and key concession agreements and forestry management contracts. She also warned that, in its current form, the

recently-passed Threshold Bill (Ref A) carried fiscal consequences that might "threaten the development [that Liberia] worked hard to promote." [NOTE. The bill would increase the number of seats in Liberia's House of Representatives at a cost of up to USD 6 million. END NOTE.]

15. (U) PEACE AND SECURITY: Sirleaf accompanied a description of the progress made in the restructuring and expansion of Liberia's security forces, with a call for Liberians to take more responsibility for their country's security as it looks to a continued drawdown of UNMIL forces. She noted that the Armed Forces of Liberia, National Coast Guard, Liberia National Police Emergency Response Unit (ERU) and Special Security Service (SSS) were all strengthened in 2009, while recognizing that the presidential SSS suffered from occasional aggressive "lapses." She said that the LNP Police Support Unit would be expanded to 600 officers by the end of the year. The National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilization, Resettlement and Reintegration, she continued, will wind down activities in mid-2010 after assisting over 7,000 ex-combatants.

16. (U) ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION: The president lauded her

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government's economic revitalization efforts since its inauguration in January 2006, but acknowledged the effect of the global financial crunch in 2009. Even so, she emphasized that her government is doing everything possible to reach the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) completion point in mid-2010. Sirleaf further highlighted that the GOL achieved a revenue surplus in 2009 amounting to USD 6.8 million fueled by a rigid internal tax revenue regime. She noted that her government is currently experiencing a budgetary shortfall, which continues to challenge her development and poverty reduction agenda. While several mineral development and agricultural concession agreements signed in 2009 contributed to the increase in revenue collection, she acknowledged that these contracts have not yet yielded the jobs she expected. All aspects of the economy, however, in her view, continue to grow remarkably.

17. (U) President Sirleaf acknowledged that agricultural growth is more effective in reducing poverty than any other sector. As a result of the GOL's "Back to the Soil" program, production of local agricultural products has grown significantly. The rubber sector experienced low production in 2009 while the cocoa and coffee sectors are being revitalized, but roads and bridges are being constructed to strengthen the country's agricultural sector. Rice and oil palm production, she said, would be significantly stepped up in 2010. Sirleaf also pushed for greater centralized control of economic development by urging that County Development Funds be managed by the executive branch through the county superintendents. However, she encouraged county legislative caucuses to exercise their oversight responsibility to ensure the expenditure of funds in a transparent manner.

18. (U) GOOD GOVERNANCE AND THE RULE OF LAW: Sirleaf characterized corruption as one of the defining challenges for Liberia, lamenting that the actions of officials, including those close to her, undermine her credibility and that of the country. She emphasized that her government is committed to delivering an improved system of governance that is more localized and responsive to the needs and aspirations of citizens. The president acknowledged the lack of adequate capacity in the judicial system, which has sometimes proved less effective in her anti-corruption drive, but vowed to intensify her fight against corruption in 2010. Sirleaf noted the creation of the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission in 2009 and the passage of the Whistle Blower Act as steps to enhance the GOL good governance policy. President Sirleaf also hailed the establishment of the Liberia Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative.

¶9. (U) INFRASTRUCTURE AND BASIC SOCIAL SERVICES: President Sirleaf said that rebuilding the physical and social infrastructure destroyed because of the Liberian civil war remains a central focus of her government. In 2009, she said, rehabilitation of 380 miles of roadway in 12 counties was completed. The Ministry of Public Works installed nine Bailey bridges and 223 road safety signs, and rehabilitated 12 public buildings. In 2010, the government will continue to expand its restoration of water and electricity to most parts of Monrovia. The government is working on ways to finance the restoration of the Mount Coffee Hydroelectric Power Plant and, in a seemingly direct address to donors, she called it "the most efficient way to provide electricity to Liberia."

¶10. (U) INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: Monrovia, Sirleaf said, hosts 18 diplomatic missions of partner countries and she thanked donors for providing USD 534 million in assistance in 2009, but, adopting a gently scolding tone, noted that only 17 percent of those funds went to direct budget support. She said that the guiding principles of Liberia's foreign policy remain unchanged. Her government will continue to promote peace, development and cooperation amongst nations of the world.

PLANNED DEVIATIONS FROM THE SCRIPTED VERSION?

¶11. (U) TRC REPORT: The TRC Report has been the most significant source of debate in Liberia since its June 2009 release; President Sirleaf was listed among those recommended in the report for a 30-year ban from public office (Ref B). Sirleaf praised the report and said that its recommendations would "heal, reconcile, restore,

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and build peace, prosperity and the progress of our nation." She then pressed Liberians to carefully digest the report and make a conscious national determination to move ahead "cautiously and strategically" in the implementation of the recommendations.

¶12. (U) The President further urged the Senate to confirm those persons nominated to the Independent National Human Rights Commission (INHCR) so they can begin working. She then proposed amendments to the INHRC Act of 2005 to enable that body to work in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice to determine which recommendations are implementable or enforceable under the constitution and laws of Liberia. Sirleaf underscored that the two TRC's proposals on national "Palaver Hut" reconciliation programs and reparations are true measures for reconciliation and committed herself to working with the Legislature to determine the processes and identify the resources for implementation of these two recommendations.

¶13. (U) In a final unexpected turn, the president announced her intent to run for re-election in 2011, despite a 2005 campaign promise to seek only one term (Ref B). This final statement drew a rousing response from nearly all legislators present.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) Since January 25, the public debate on whether or not Sirleaf should run for re-election and on her suggestions for a response to the TRC's recommendations has overshadowed and largely muted any strong reaction to the speech. Opposition responses to the first part of Sirleaf's speech addressing PRS successes and challenges, and only began to appear in the press after one week. Commentators instead continue to focus almost wholly on the president's re-election announcement. Sirleaf's annual, constitutionally-required presentation has been overshadowed by an apparent unofficial kickoff of campaigning for the 2011 vote. Pre-election stumping could prevent much-needed collaboration between the president and legislature and hinder Liberia's recovery in 2010.

¶15. (U) The full collection of President Sirleaf's annual messages and an expanded version of the 2010 address are available online at: <http://www.emansion.gov.lr/> under the "Speeches" tab.
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